

## Survivor's Song

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Category: X-Men

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 1999-09-09 08:00:00

Updated: 1999-09-09 08:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 09:19:54

Rating: T

Chapters: 1

Words: 12,902

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: The kids go to Muir to discover that one of them is infected with Legacy. A Second Chances story.

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> <meta name="Generator"> Leaving A Legacy

STORY BLURB: After their recent gallivanting and clash with the Nasty Boys, the kids are taken to Muir for Legacy testingâ€"after all, you don't know where Sinister's boys have been! However, all may not be well. Does one of the GenXers have the dreaded virus? And if so, which one? What will it mean to those around them? Read and find out!

NOTES: This is my attempt at the 'Blow KJ Away' Challenge. Itâ€| Well, it hurt to write it, after a while. I just hope it doesn't hurt to \_read\_ it.

Rating: PG-13â€"some harsh language, emotional subjects, the works.

THANKS: To all of #plotting on DalNet who endured my questions and worries. Also, in my question for perfection, I sent this to Chiaki, Lyssie, Twiller, Dyce, Trisha Lynn, Angel Child, and Ryan West, who I had beta-read.

Dedication: To Katie and Ericâ€"you are both greatly missed, my friends.

By Mandy 'Harlequin' Lever

Leaning against the window, Everett Thomas was very aware of the roar of Frost's private (and some would say overly decadent) jet's engine, the howl of the winds as the plane bolted across the ocean, and the general tenseness within.

They were headed to Muir Island. Once home to Excalibur, the

'European X-Men', whose roster had consisted of both former X-Men and unaffiliated British nationals and later aliens and multi-dimensional rogues. To say the least, they had a very colorful history.

But the team had long ago disbanded. Only three people remained on Muir—Moira MacTaggert, Sean Cassidy's long-time and long-distance lover, Rahne Sinclair, Moira's adopted daughter, and Douglock, the phalanx-being that had both Warlock and Doug Ramsey's engrams patterned upon him. The others had all returned to their lives—Brian and Meggan Braddock had moved to the Braddock manor to live out their lives and serve Britain, while Kitty Pryde, Kurt Wagner, and Piotr Rasputin returned to serve with the X-Men. No one was quite sure where Pete Wisdom had ended up after the dissolution of his and Kitty's relationship. There had been a few rumors, but he hadn't turned up regardless of what any of them had heard.

Everett glanced over at the girl asleep in the chair next to him. Jubilation Lee, otherwise known as 'Jubilee' or 'the paffer', his girlfriend, snored softly in her seat. Across the aisle, Jonothon held a slumbering Gayle against his shoulder.

Ev extended his aura, the dance of color around his skin grabbing the Brit's attention. Jono watched as it settled into an odd formation around the younger mutant, as if it were burning over his chest and face, but didn't move beyond that.

Borrowing me telepathy, mate? Jonothon queried his words for Everett's mind alone, for fear of disturbing the other slumbering mutants.

Yeah. I think everyone's asleep but the pilot and us.

Jonothon chuckled softly, the sound vaguely unnatural for all that it was a telepathic projection. Probably a good thing. I imagine everyone's gonna be rather tense once they start drawin' out the needles and askin' everyone 'cept me t' stick out their tongues and say 'Ahh'.

Ev smirked. Or turn their heads and cough?

Yeh. 'zactly. I just wonder why Cassidy and Frost decided t' do this now. I mean, we all got tested for Legacy when we first came t' the school. Jonothon made a derisive sound that couldn't quite be quantified. Not like I'm going t' get it 'r anythin'.  
> <p>

You never know, Jonothon. We've been exposed to a lot of stuff over the last three 'r so years. We might have gotten it. First-Stage legacy has no outward symptoms. Ev glanced down at Jubilee, and then over to Gayle. After all—well, Gayle's an emplaced human. She could have gotten it anytime. It does infect humans, and if she's ever fed off an infected mutant—She could be at risk.

Jonothon was reasonably sobered, and nodded once to his teammate's words. Point. He glanced at the fitfully sleeping young woman who leaned against him as she dozed, and then at the seat before him. So, you think any of us actually 'ave it?

No, I don't. But it never hurts to be safe, now does it? Ev replied,

then sighed as he let his head thump back against the seat.

Guess not. The black-clad Brit glanced over at Everett as he tried to settle back. Get some sleep. You'll need it when the jet lag hits. I may not 'ave a time-sense, but yer do.

Everett smiled slightly and nodded, his aura faded and he settled back. Time to try and sleep. They'd be at Muir in no time, and he didn't want to be grouchy and restless for the battery of medical tests they were going to put him through.

Jonothon watched Everett eventually fall asleep, and then touched Gayle's hair in the silence. It would be a long time waiting, but then, he was used to it.

He settled back, eyes on the window, and waited for the announcement of their landing.

\* \* \* \* \*

The fact that it was windy and the sky was gray was almost appropriate. In the last three years, Moira had only seen her long-time lover but once. Sean and the children had rested in Scotland for a few days after retrieving them from Operation: Zero Tolerance and the Prime Sentinels. The two had picnicked and gotten reacquainted.

But it had been sunny that day. Sun for the warmth of his skin, the touch of his hand, the reminder of the love between them.

Today, it was gray and stormy. After all, he was coming out here on business, not pleasure. And so it was only appropriate that it as just as impersonal and unpleasant as the work that was to be done.

The plane touched down, the engines died. Douglock wheeled up the stairs so that the mutants clustering around the door could finally disembark. Rahne stood beside Moira, ever the faithful daughter, and waited, red hair whipping around her neck.

The students disembarked first. A gray-skinned youth was in the lead, already digging for a pack of cigarettes. A blond-haired young woman trailed behind him, and then a typically British-looking youth behind them.

They trailed out, the gray boy immediately flipping out his lighter to get to smoking. Moira eyed him critically, and then shook her head. Scruffy and stinking of smoke reminded her of Wisdom already. Just needed to give him a bath in scotch and he'd probably be a younger, gray double of the English sod.

They all gathered together, the majority of them shivering and giving a very loud complaint about the cold wind and then parted as their teachers and associated faculty headed down the stairs as well.

Emma, regal as always, came down with the air of a queen in her white cashmere sweater. Callisto, her old bodyguard and companion, came after with Sean behind her.

She didn't notice Hank's bulk squeeze out of the small door, she merely saw Sean. Her Sean, her accushla, her everything. She moved over without hesitation and he grinned. Might as well greet him like they used to!

Though he had seemed very much his age of late, he swept her up as she got closer and gave her a warm kiss. "Missed ye," he said gruffly once they'd parted.

"Missed ye too, y' old windbag."

And then they noticed the cat-calls from the students or at least, whistles from Jubilee. "You go, 'Shee!" came from the gray-skinned youth.

The couple turned as one and scowled at Angelo, his blond companion elbowing him in the ribs. He quieted between the double assault.

Sean leaned over and whispered in her ear "so shall we get down tae business? I'll get the wee ones settled, an' then into testing?"

She nodded. "Aye. Let 'em settle in while I get Hank re-familiarized with Muir's equipment and we'll start early in the mornin'." She stopped a moment as she drew away from him to motion them all toward the facilities. "An' Sean? Make sure the gray lad knows Muir is strictly \_non-smoking.\_"

A nod was his reply, coupled with a soft chuckle, before he began to help her herd the tired young mutants into the complex. All it was going to be was a few days, and everything would be clear.

Or at least, that's what they all hoped.

\* \* \* \* \*

"To think that people like Kurt Wagner and Piotr Rasputin were living in these rooms," Everett Thomas mused as he lugged his suitcase down the hall.

Monet St. Croix walked down the hall with one in hand as well, seeming not to have half as much trouble as Everett did with his. "And this impresses you?" she asked as she opened the door to her room, where Kitty Pryde had been staying not but a year ago.

"Yeah!" he called from across the hall. "I mean, these people were Excalibur! The British X-Men!"

"They are also very disbanded, Everett," Monet reminded him from the hallway.

He slumped a little, then shrugged. "They were needed elsewhere."

"Ahh, yes. So they abandoned their protectorate and went home. Very 'heroic' of them."

Everett slumped slightly and then just shook his head then felt a

tingle as another aura came into range.

Monet watched from the door of her claimed room as the young man stopped and his synchronistic aura exploded to life, fluctuating around him with wild colors and dancing light. Of course, she remained nonplussed. "Everett, what \_are\_ you doing?"

"Rahne's coming down the hall. I'm trying on her aura for size," the mutant St. Louis native explained, and then smiled. "She's got great sensesâ€"and you smell like cinnamon." He smiled across the hall at her, and then blinked as she did something entirely unexpected.

Monet St. Croix blushed delicately.

"Merci," she said simply as he paused and just looked at him for a time. "Enjoy your 'sizing', Everett. I am going to get overâ€| jet lag." And then she stepped back into her room and shut the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Standing outside the Muir Island Research Facility's medical lab, Paige read down the list that hung on the door. They were doing the Legacy tests in pairsâ€"Hank would do one set, Moira the other. And in about fifteen minutes, she and Jubilee would swap out with Gayle and Angelo.

She sighed and let go of the list, pacing in circles before the doors. When were they going to finish? She realized that the tests they ran on Gayle ran both through the mutant DNA she imprinted on her own when she fed, and then through her human DNA, but that didn't mean it should take so long! So why were they taking forever?

"Yo, hayseed, chill," Jubilee said leaning from her position against the wall opposite the door. "Getting yourself all worked up is just gonna make this tougher."

Paige shrugged as she looked over at her classmate. "I know," she explained, "but that doesn't mean I'm not going to be nervous. I mean, they've got no cure, a hundred percent kill-ratio, andâ€"

"â€"And Moira's had it for over three years now and she ain't slowin' down any," Jubilee said with a lack of patience. "And they're workin' on a cure, Paige. But miracles aren't done overnight all the time, y' know? And I don't think of any us got it."

"There are no symptoms for First Stage Legacy," Paige said bleakly. "When you begin to move into second stage, you get a lung infectionâ€| and then the blotches. We could have it and not know itâ€"it's like HIV's 'dormancy phase' that way."

Jubilee arched a slender brow and resisted the urge to correct her perfectionist teammate, but thought better of it. "You've been reading the medical journals again, haven't you?" She shrugged slightly as the older mutant gave her a withering look. "Just askin'. Don't have to give me the 'Gaze of Death' over 'r anything."

"Yes, I've been reading up the last few days," Paige confirmed. "Might as well know what we might be getting into."

Jubilee was quiet a moment as she looked critically at her companion. Then she shook her head quietly. "You really think one of us got it, don't you?"

Paige fidgeted quietly, wringing her hands and looking quite miserable before she said anything more. "You know the statistics for the average X-Team? A casualty every three years. You know ours? Clarice, our first year" and she just reappeared in the employ of Mr. Sinister. Mondo, our second year. This is our third year" so the lot is up. We almost lost Gayle at Christmas" but she squeaked by." She didn't look up as she continued bleakly. "The way I look at it, we're due another casualty. Might as well be from Legacy" then we'll have rounded it out. A traitor, a clone or resurrection, and then a Legacy victim. Then all we'll need is a genuine 'death in the line of duty' and we'll be on par with the X-Men."

Jubilee was quiet for a long, tense moment, and then, she finally spoke. "You know Paige, I think you give this stuff way too much thought. And I thought your X-Men obsession was bad" no wonder you found Gothboy so hot."

"Oh, shut up. See if I ever explain anything to you anymore," Paige grumbled as she looked toward the door" and then started as it began to slide open.

Angelo and Gayle walked out together, smiling and talking, apparently without any care.

"Â;Madre de dios! I've never been poked so many times with a needle! I think I've been shot at less," Angelo joked as his eyes turned to find the discomfited look his girlfriend displayed. His smile faded. "Paige, are you okay?"

Paige managed a slight smile for him, even as Gayle politely went quiet, moving around the people in the hall to continue on, giving Paige her time with Ange. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just nervous."

Angelo's lips curved upwards as he reached out and took her hands. "You got nothing to worry about. Just a few tests and then an 'all-clear' message." His tone was easily confident and Paige found herself envying the ease of which he could just blow this all off.

"If you say so," she replied, before Jubilee 'ahemed' softly.

"Hey, hayseed, we're next. C'mon, Kentucky."

Angelo gave Paige a quick kiss before releasing her hands. "Don't worry. Won't be any troubles for us at all, I'm sure."

She brightened a little. If the boy from L.A. whose life had been so hard, an actual struggle to survive, could be so positive about the possible outcome of her tests, then so could she. "Yeah. See ya later, Angie."

Angelo watched her vanish into the medlab with Jubilee, and then headed back to his room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What was that about, anyway?"

Angelo blinked as he saw Gayle waiting around the corner as he left Paige's side. He smiled at her and then shrugged his thin shoulders a little before answering. "She's always been reallyâ€¦ spooked by the whole Legacy thing. It scares her."

Gayle pursed her lips quietly, and then nodded. "She seems the type to obsess."

Angelo just outright laughed. "The 'type'. She's a Type-A Personality right down the line, chica. Obsessing comes part-and-parcel with it."

"Ahh, but you wouldn't have her any other way," Gayle said in return. They dropped into a brief silence, the Englishwoman looking out the window toward the gray, Scottish skies.

"Penny?"

"Mmm?" she roused from her thoughts as Angelo caught her attention and then turned her dark green eyes on him, smiling slightly. "You're picking up my speech, y' know. 'Penny'."

He laughed again, softer. "Yeah, well, you still won't catch me using 'sod' or 'bloody'."

"Suppose not. After three years chumming with Jono, you think you'd might have picked it up." There was another pause. "Angeloâ€¦"

He knew it was coming even before she said anything. "What?" It was going to be the \_'When are you going to forgive Jono?\_' question. He just knew it was.

She glanced over at him a moment, reading his tensionâ€¦ and then shrugged and shook her head. "Nevermind."

He kicked himself mentally. \_There is no need to get snippy with his girlfriend. She's always been nice and understanding. Even if you did get hot and heavy with her in the grotto,\_ he muttered inwardly. "Gayle, listen. I'm notâ€¦ It's been two months. I know that. But I'm sorry, he kicked the living hell outta me. Over a girl he was supposed to be \_over.\_"

She flinched and he inwardly kicked himself again. \_Yeah, Espinosa, remind her that she still can't be sure if Jono is really back with her or not. Like she doesn't have enough shit with him to deal with. \_"I've been nothing but his best friend for two years, chica. Maybe it's just time I started going back to looking out for me and what I want for now? And what I want is Paige. What I don't want is aâ€¦" \_self-absorbed, angsting asshole who won't get on with his life, \_"â€¦jerk for a best friend. I know he's trying to be 'better'â€¦", \_though better at what I'm still not sure, \_"â€¦but I justâ€¦I put up with it for two years, chica. I had my fill. Someone else can mend him."

This was obviously not the answer she was hoping for. Her face fell and her head drooped a little and her eyes found a fascinating stretch of floor to stare atâ€¦and he immediately felt guilty.

But he didn't let that change a damn thing. He wasn't forgiving Jono. Not now, and maybe not ever.

They walked along in silence back to the 'residential wing', Gayle's mood not improving as they went and Angelo's fading along with it. Without words, they split at their separate rooms and went inside.

Angelo had a lot to think about, after all, and plenty of time to do it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Five hours, six students, and five faculty members later, Moira was exhausted. One hand remained poised over her keyboard as she watched her computers analyze blood, tissue and other bodily samples from each of the students. "Coffee?" she offered to her compatriot and colleague, the blue-furred mutant known as Dr. Henry McCoy.

Hank looked up from his studies, blue eyes lacking their usual light. "Moira, what you have in that mug is not coffee. I do not know what it is, and perhaps there are some things men and mutants are not meant to know, but I do know that the concoction in that mug isn't coffee."

She gave a dry snort in response, before going back to sipping the thick, dark liquid. "Suit yuirself."

She leaned back in her chair, making a tiny groan as her vertebrae popped back into place. She'd been in and out of that desk chair far, far too often of late, and it was beginning to show.

"If my esteemed colleague and Lady of Kinross doesn't mind, she could be treated to a bit of massage to ease away some of her stress awayâ€|"

Moira chuckled softly, "No, but thank ye for the thought. I'll be fine. When all of these test are through an' clear, that is." A wary eye was turned to the computer, silently bidding it to give each and every patient a clean bill of health.

It obediently whirred and clicked.

"Perhaps we ought to go get some much-needed fresh air? Talk to the latest inheritors of Xavier's dream? Or reacquaint yourself with Sean while he's here, perhaps?" Hank suggested, his lips tugging up into a sly smile. Moira merely scoffed at his suggestions.

"Nae, I don't want tae be away till I know these tests are clean," she explained. "I think I owe them thaâ€" her voice was cut off by a sharp, repeated 'ping' from one of the terminals.

Both froze, before turning in unison to stare at the flashing red flag that had appeared.

Moira's coffee cup hit the floor and shattered in her haste to get to the computer, her fingers dancing over the keys. Hank leaned over her shoulder, blue eyes fearful. Finally, she confirmed aloud what the computer screen burned into their retinas.

"Oh God. We've got a positive. We've got an infection."

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"I hate this," Callisto growled roughly as she paced the window. "Why can't they just tell us?"

She turned an accusing stare to the three other members of the faculty—Sean Cassidy and Emma Frost, co-headmasters, and Cecilia Reyes, who'd taken on a permanent position at the Academy as the on-site, on-call physician.

"Lass—" Cassidy admonished, only to find himself cut off abruptly.

"I am not a 'lass' or a 'lassie' or a goddamned 'child' either. I am, however, fucking impatient. Why are they keeping us in the dark? Shouldn't we be there with them? Watching over these tests as they come and go?" The Morlock stared moodily out the window, her wild black hair falling about her one, blazing eye. It had become apparent over the last four-and-a-half months she'd spent with the students that she'd come to regard them like her lost Morlocks—but this outburst more than anything proved her concern.

"Callisto—" Cecilia smoothly interjected before the rough-tongued Morlock could begin to rail again "—this is hard for all of us. However, Moira and Hank are doing the best they can. We would only be a bother in their lab and instead of having four sets of frazzled nerves, we'd have six. It's better that we wait here." Normally, she was the one delivering the news to a family or spouse about the conditions of their loved ones, but this time she'd opted to allow Hank and Moira to work alone in this. After all, she wasn't the biochemist that Hank was, nor the geneticist that Moira was. She was a simply surgeon—no matter how odd that sounded.

The wild Morlock calmed slowly, and then just shook her head.

The tense minutes bled into hours as they waited. The television was suffered, a number of alcoholic beverages were imbibed, then, finally, the door to the lounge swung open.

Moira stood alone, her clipboard clutched to her chest and her eyes hollow.

When they looked at her, they knew.

Emma was the first to find her voice. "Which one?" There was a dread certainty in the chill of the White Queen's words, but only her long-practiced cool composure kept the quaver from her voice.

"Yuir all clean," Moira said simply, delaying the news futilely. "And all of yuir students are—" she took a tremulous breath, "but one."

Sean sank into the nearest chair, his legs giving way abruptly. "Ach, nae—" he said despondently, "Nae—" "

Moira crumped, doing her best not to go over to her long-time lover's side as she delivered the news. "Hank's already taken the liberty of

goin' tae tell himâ€| He'll be findin' out shortly."

"Thank you, Moira," Emma said simply, as she rose from her seat and set her brandy glass aside. She looked at Sean as he took a moment to cover his eyes with his hand, and then at the now quiet Morlock and the equally silent Dr. Reyes.

Without a word, she strode from the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Yawning softly as the knock at his door roused him from sleep, Angelo rolled over and stared out into the darkness.

And dammit, he'd just gotten to sleep, too! He grumbled and rubbed his eyes and tightened his skin a little as he tossed back the covers and stumbled out of the bed. \_If this is Paige wanting to get cozy without prior warning, I'm just gonna send her back to her room and a cold shower, \_he grumbled inwardly, and then growled, as the soft knock sounded again.

"Dammit, I'm comin'," he snarled drowsily as he finally got to the door. He banged his toe against the jam as he opened it, and then cursed softly as he finally got the door open without doing anymore damage to his person.

The massive bulk in the doorway was certainly \_not\_ Paige. Angelo slowly looked up into Hank McCoy's face, and the bright blue eyes that looked suddenly faded. "Buenos nochesâ€| what do you want?" Angelo mumbled sleepily as he looked up into that broad, bestial face.

Hank's voice was oddly flat as he spoke. "There are things which we must discuss, Angelo."

Angelo blinked again, the uncharacteristic severity of Hank's tone drawing him quickly from his sleep. Blue eyes faintly luminescent in the darkness, he opened the door, and then a swath of gray skin reached out and flipped on the lights. "SÃ-, c'mon in, SeÃ±or McCoy."

"Sit down, Angelo." Hank's voice was gentle, but firm, as one large hand reached out and pressed down on the boy's shoulder till he sat back down upon his rumpled bed. "Iâ€| I'm going to be blunt, Angelo. This is about your tests."

—

\_Tests? \_Angelo blinked slowly, as his eyes began to widen. \_Oh, Dios, let him be talkin' about the chemistry finals. \_

— —

It was not the first time Angelo Espinosa feared for his life.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was not uncommon for Paige to be up at the crack of dawn. However, being up at the crack of the Scottish dawn was something newâ€| especially because of the strangeness of jet lag. It was like being

up in the middle of the night in Massachusetts.

But there she was, having been roused from her bed by a tired-looking Sean with important news. Realizing that it was probably about the tests, she was soon very awake and very nervous.

Everyone gathered, one by one, into the expansive kitchen. Rahne and Douglock were both suspiciously quiet, preparing breakfast for themselves and then slinking away elsewhere in the complex.

Paige quietly observed the kitchen. Everything about this—“from her sleepy-eyed classmates to her exhausted looking faculty—“didn't look well. But everyone was here and there was no outright crying or upset proclamations of legacy infections, so it must be okay. However, there was one person she couldn't find among the crowd who she really wanted to see.

Angelo. Where was Angelo? Late as always, even for this important announcement? She fidgeted, wishing he'd get here so \_she'd\_ have someone to hug when they got the 'all-clear' answer he'd said they'd get.

"I figured ye'd all want tae know about the test results," Sean began, his voice rough from sleeplessness, "as soon as ye could. Well, last night they all finished compilin'. Everyone in this room came out clean."

Paige looked over her shoulder, looking for Angelo again, as she blinked the last remnants of slumber from her eyes. "Mr. Cassidy, shouldn't this wait till Angelo is here to listen?" Looking back to Sean, his pale green eyes met hers, only to fall away.

"Angelo isnae in the room, lass," he said simply. "An'—| his tests did \_not\_ come out all clear." Ignoring the strangled gasps and the tiny moan of shock and fear, he continued, "Angelo has a First-Stage Legacy infection. He musta gotten it recently, however, for it's just in the beginin' of Stage One. However, due t' the nature of his powers, we don't expect it t' stay dormant for long."

Where is 'e? Jonothon asked slowly, holding Gayle a little tighter.

"He—| Hank told him last night. He wanted some time tae himself tae think," Sean explained. "Now, I'm sure ye've a good number of questions an' concerns—|"

Monet was the first to speak, and she ignored Paige's glower as she asked about her own concerns. "What is the likelihood that any of us will contract Legacy from Angelo?"

"Honestly, quite low. You would have to have some contact with Angelo's body fluids." Hank said, as he rubbed his eyes tiredly. "He is infected with the second generation Legacy, which is not an airborne variant. You are not in any danger from living with him, though things may have to change a little for him. However," Hanks voice was firm, "he is no danger to you, and nor will he be leaving the Academy. Right now, it's the best place for him. I'll be continuing my work there on Legacy, with Angelo, as I attempt to help Gayle." Despite his calm, the warning in his voice was clear.

"You confuse my desire for self-preservation with selfishness, Dr. McCoy," Monet said as politely as she could manage. "I do not wish Angelo cast into the street like a leper—I merely wish to know the risks we're taking on now. I'm quite certain I can speak for the class when I say that infected or not, Angelo is a friend and teammate, and will not simply be cast to the wayside."

Her words and the murmured agreements of the rest of the class mollified both Hank and Paige, as the blond farmgirl lifted her eyes to Sean. "Where is he?"

"Angelo asked for some time alone, Paige, to consider some things," Sean said as gently as he could manage. However, Emma cut him off with her cool, firm voice.

"He is out by the docks. However, I would not suggest immediately rushing to his side. He's still coming to terms with his infection. While you can help him, I suggest letting him get used to the idea that he is sick, and then what that means to him and the rest of the team, in time." She paused, blue eyes actually dropping from the group's collective gaze, as she continued. "He has always prided himself of being a rarity among his family and friends, and even among us—a survivor."

Jubilee quietly asked, "Does anyone know how he got it in the first place? And why the rest of us don't have it?"

For a time, the moment after her words hung in a pregnant pause, as she just waited for the explosion. Finally, Hank cleared his throat, and answered calmly. "From what we can tell, he gained it in a fluid transfer of some sort from an infected mutant. The airborne variation of the disease was remarkably resilient, but in the end, mutated or failed to thrive here. It's now primarily transferred much like AIDS and HIV is." He paused a moment, and then pushed his spectacles further up his nose. "From what we can deduce, however, two of you are immune, due to the nature of your powers."

Brows raised and heads tilted as they all considered who among them might be so lucky to escape the possibility of getting this dread disease.

Bet one of 'em's me, Jonathon said after a moment. Can't infect dead cells, and I've got nothin' t' 'ost it in.

"Very true," Hank concurred. "As well, due to the mutable form of Ms. Guthrie, she herself cannot be infected. As her body is in a constant state of flux, it changes faster than the virus can adapt to its environment. She cannot even host the disease."

Paige gave a weak titter at the irony. She couldn't get it, but the young man she'd fallen so very much in love with, could.

Silence reigned as they realized that gravity of what that might mean to the pair of young lovers. Finally, Everett broke the silence. "He won't stop training with us, will he?"

"We haven't discussed that," Emma said. "Sean, Callisto, and I will be making that decision, based on the risks to his health."

There was a nod or two. "And if things progress to a definite

fatality?" Monet queried.

Emma's voice was cold. "We will do our best to prevent that." As she straightened, she added, "Hank and Dr. Reyes will be hard at work at the Academy, and Moira will be working with them here at Muir, around the clock, to stave off any one's death."

There was another uncomfortable silence. But this time, Paige gave a tiny, broken laugh, gaining everyone's attention. She wiped at her already over-flowing eyes, and murmured, "Y' know, Ah always thought it was the silliest damn thingâ€”\_hoping\_ to live ta see twenty-one. Such a little thing ta worry about!" Her voice quavered, as she looked down at the ground hopelessly. "Maybe nowâ€”| maybe now it ain't so silly." And then she was bolting for the door.

"Dammit," Sean muttered under his breath, before looking to Emma. "I'llâ€”"

I'll go after 'er, Jonothon interrupted as he extricated himself from Gayle's embrace. The young Britons shared a moment of silent communication, then Gayle nodded quietly, leaning back against the door counter alone, her arms wrapped around herself.

"I dunnae think that's the wisestâ€”"

There are things yer don't know, Cassidy. Jonothon stated bluntly, An' I'm gonner be there for 'er. Again. I'll see yer later.

Ignoring Sean's spluttering, Jono simply left the kitchen and prayed that Paige didn't know where Moira kept her scotch.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angelo Espinosa crouched on the docks, looking down into the water, the wind whipping around his thin frame. It seemed so damn appropriate, sitting out here, staring into the water and pondering on his life. Reflecting on his reflection, perhaps? No, the water was too murky, too choppy from the winds to show him his own faceâ€”not that he'd want to see it.

He could only imagine how he looked! He hadn't slept since Hank delivered the news of his infection last night, and had spent most of his night wandering the complex, then out on the cliffs, staring off across the water and into the 'great beyond' as he contemplated his fate.

How could it happen? Happen to \_him, \_no less?! He'd always been a survivor, a fighter, struggling to see another dayâ€”| and now a tiny virus was going to unravel him at a genetic level. The unfairness of it was unbearable. He couldn't beat it up, shoot it, curbstomp it, or otherwise harm it. He just had to endure it.

He sat down, letting his legs dangle from the pier as he sat and stewed. At first, he didn't hear the soft, careful footfalls behind himâ€”and then they were close enough to be almost right behind him.

"I thought I told Cassidy I didn't want to see anybody yet."

He turned slowly, and blinked as he looked up into a set of bright, blue eyesâ€”but not the blue eyes he was expecting! No, the last person he thought would come after him was standing there.

Jubilee, with her yellow coat whipping around her legs in the wind. She ran one hand up through her now weather-mused hair, and said, "Tough, Gray. I ain't Cassidy."

"No, chica, you ain't." He shook off his momentary surprise, and then said, "Have a seat, then. Can't say I'm gonna be the best company, though."

"I know," said Jubilee as she sat down beside him cross-legged. "I don't expect ya ta be."

They say in brief, tense silence, before Angelo shattered it like glass. "What do you want out here with me, Jubilee?"

"I don't 'want' anything, really. 'Cept maybe for you to know you're not alone. We're gonna stick by ya. Even Monet." She gave a nervous titter, and then fell quiet. "Youâ€¦ you know we love ya an' all, Ange. Me, Ev, even M and Jono."

He took a deep, slow breath, narrow frame expanding slightly before he let out a gusty sigh and just seemed to slump in on himself.

Jubilee took this as a bad sign, and then offered lamely, "Y' know, I was thereâ€¦ all through Illyana's illness. She was the first to die from Legacy, y' know."

He shot her a glance. Oh, just what he wanted hear. "If this turns into an 'When I was with the X-Men' story, Lee, I'm dumping you off the pier!"

"No no," she said hurriedly and then snorted. "You think I'm that bad? Thanks a lot. I justâ€¦ I just wanted you to knowâ€¦ I was by her side as much as I could be. I mean, she was just a little kid. And I know you ain't no kid, an' I know it's gonna be hard and you're gonna hurtâ€¦ and it's gonna hurt to watchâ€¦ but I'm here for ya, Angelo." And then she just slid her arms around his thin shoulders and hugged him tightly.

He looked over at her, eyes dim and red with his tumultuous emotions, and then said, "Gracias, chica," as he allowed himself a moment of weakness and buried his face in her neck, giving a shuddering sigh.

"You oughta go back inside. It's cold an' yer damn near frozen out here."

He laughed softly, and then shrugged. "Little cold ain't gonna kill me."

"You don't know that, now. So, c'mon. Just this once." She paused, and then added the finishing stroke. "Please?"

He gave another little sigh, and nodded. Untangling his limbs from hers, he rose and then looked back out over the water. The wind didn't calm, the sea sloshed and rolled with the force of the air,

and he sighed softly.

"You'll get through this," she said gently. "I know you will."

"I hope so, Jubilee," he said, with little of said emotion to his voice, "I really hope so."

\* \* \* \* \*

Scotch. Real, honest-to-God \_Glenfiddich Scotch.\_ The real deal. Not that watered down beer she'd had that gotten her ill back in Massachusetts.

What a way to start out the morning. It wasn't even ten A.M. yetâ€"but here she was, ready to get drunk and spend the day either unconscious or ill. Anything but thinking...

Thinking that she was going to lose Angelo. Anything was preferable to that! Pain, bleeding, unconsciousness, deliriumâ€"anything would be better than the cold knowledge that settled into her stomach like a ball of ice and froze her blood.

She gripped the bottle's stopper and pulled it free with an audible \*\_pop\*\_ , and debated drinking directly from the bottle or from the small glass she'd appropriated from the bar.

I'm pretty sure yer don't want t' do that, Paige. Her heart plummeted to about the level of her shoes as she heard his voice. What was \_he\_ doing here? Jonothon was certainly not who she expected to come after her, considering what she's done the last time news about Legacy had hit her.

"Go away, Jono. Ya the last person Ah wanna see right now," she said, her voice unsteady as she held onto the bottle tightly.

No. I'm not gonner let yer fall apart again. Not like this, not when 'e's gonner need yer.

She heard him approach her, felt the space between them close until he was at her back. His hands lifted up, and closed over her shoulders. "Jonoâ€|"

Put the bottle down, Paige. Yer know it won't solve a damn thing. Yer'll wake up after bein' sick an' instead of everythin' bein' betterâ€| it'll still be there. The same as it always was. His hands tightened on her shoulders as he spoke, almost to the point of hurting her, forcing her to listen to what he had to say. Yer'll 'ave t' keep drinkin' after that, Paige. Keep drinkin' away what's happeningâ€"an' that's what yer life will be. Nothin' but pain and pissin' yer time away.

She began to tremble under his hands. "First Ah lost Daddy, an'â€| an' Ah thought that if Ah ever had to go through that, Ah'd rather die. And then, I had yaâ€| and itâ€| it all fell apart. An' then Ah found Angelo, an' he's the best thing that's ever come mah way, Jono." She turned slowly, hands still clutching the bottle to her. "Ah can't lose him. Ah \_can'tâ€|\_"

His hands dropped from her shoulders as her words tapered off, and he began to carefully pry her fingers loose from the glass. I know. An'

yer not going to lose 'im. They're not gonner let 'im die, gel. Yer should know 'at. One by one, her fingers were opened, and finally, he got the bottle, and carefully put it to the side.

He turned, and looked back at herâ€”face was sallow and pale, blue eyes seemed permanently caught in a horrified stare. It was enough to make his non-existent heart break. No matter what had once been between them had faded, no matter that they would never be lovers and that their romance had withered on the vineâ€”he had to hold her, reassure her, comfort her when she needed it.

She folded up in his embrace without complaint, shuddering as the sobs began. "Ah can't do it. Ah just can't, Jono. Ah don't want him to be sick, Ah don't want him t' dieâ€”|"

Then 'e won't, luv, he assured her as he rocked her and words gave way to sobs. Her arms came up to cling to him, holding him tightly as the force of her fear and sorrow shook her.

He just stood there, and let her get it out so she could be stable for Angelo later. One long fingered hand stroked her hair, the other just pressed against her back.

It was a time before she was calm again, and he continued to rock her in the silence, as she got a grip. Finally, a she piped up in a tiny voice. "Ahâ€”| thank you."

No problem, sunshine. I'm sure later on I'll need a shoulder t' lean on. An' besides. Ange won't let me be there for 'imâ€”| So yer gonner need t' be extra strong for 'im. He brushed her hair away from her face, cupping chin so she had to look up into his deep brown eyes, as he spoke with grave seriousness to his hollow, psionic voice, But I know yer can be there for 'im. Yer were for me, even though I 'urt yer in return. I know 'e won't be 'alf the bloody sod I was.

She nodded quietly, both at his admittance of foolishness and at the need to be strong, to be there for Angelo. Yes, she could do it. This was different than her and Jono falling apart because he wasn't ready to love another woman again, this was a personal crisis and they could overcome! "Thank ya," she repeated and then pulled him down and kissed his cheek. "For everythin'."

Yer welcome, Paige, he said solemnly.

She released him slowly, extricating herself from his black-leather embrace, then said, "Ahâ€”| Ah gotta think some. Then Ah'm gonna go find himâ€”|"

He nodded as she slipped away, watching her go. Good luck.

She nodded once, and then dashed away. He sighed softly, and looked at the liquor cabinet himself. A nice, stiff drink sounded pretty good, no matter that he'd dissuaded her from it.

Now, maybe he could curl up with Gayle and get a little comfort of his own.

\* \* \* \* \*

The chill was comforting somehow, Emma decided, as she leaned against

the windowpane in a moment of repose seeming almost vulnerable. She looked half her age in the reflection that peered back at her from the glass, her blue eyes almost unnaturally dark as she watched the thin young Latino and the Asian girl with him walk back up from the docks.

"Youâ€| do not look very well, Emma."

She didn't sigh, no matter how much she wanted to. She knew this was bound to happenâ€|though she didn't expect the one to seek her out and try and offer comfort to be Hank McCoy. She turned to see the big, blue scientist and X-Man leaning in the doorway, cleaning his glasses with a kerchief before replacing them on his broad face.

"Going to use your spectacles to attempt to look see past this chill demeanor and white mask and see the mourning woman inside, Hank?" she asked without emotion or inflection as she straightened, resisting the impulse to fold her arms over her chest in a defensive stance.

"Perhaps. And perhaps, with my own, unaided vision I can see that. For all your attempts to block everyone out, Emma, we know you better than that."

"Then perhaps I should work a little harder."

His lips curled up in a smile, displaying his pointed, bestial teeth. "No, Emma, I doubt that would be the most reasonable solution you could deduce." He straightened the glasses on his nose, and then quietly walked over, peering out the window over her his shoulder. He smiled slightly as he just caught the last glance of Jubilee and Angelo coming back up to the complex before they vanished to another side of the house.

He was quiet for a time, looking down at his equally silent companion. "You know I will do my utmost to save his life, Emma," he said gently. "He has so much potentialâ€|"

She gave a soft snort, and moved away. "All of my students have potential, Henry."

She heard his faint, resigned sigh, but neither said a word. They remained in tense silence, until finally, he said, "Do not mourn a student you haven't yet lost, Emma. Cultivate hope and perhaps, something might come from it."

"Better to be prepared for the sting of loss, I think, then to delude myself with false hope."

He sighed gustily, "I'm sorry you feel that way."

She glanced back over her shoulder at him, and watched him rub the bridge of his nose in a gesture of weariness.

He finally raised his gaze to her face, and then offered, "Now that my efforts to raised your spirits have failed, I've work to attend to. Good day, Emma." He turned, walking toward the door.

As he reached it, she finally spoke again. "I know you'll do your

best, Henry."

"A conciliatory statement at best, Emma," he said lowly. "You know I'll do my bestâ€"but you're still firm in the assessment that I'll fail him."

She did not dispute him.

He shook his head and merely left her alone with her hopelessness and grief.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the morning progressed, Everett found himself sitting across from his girlfriend. Her face was sallow and wan, her blue eyes glued to the coffee cup held tightly in her hands.

And she didn't even like coffee.

Of course, no one liked Moira's coffee. But there she was, sipping the noxious mixture and being quiet. She'd been like that since she'd returned from the docks with Angelo. The young man she'd sought out to see just smiled a little, ducked his head, and said he'd be okay and slunk off for parts unknownâ€"probably to talk to Paige.

However, Everett was more concerned with his girlfriend, rather than Angelo's. "So, how did it go out there?" he finally ventured, cautious but curious.

"It went," she said blandly, her eyes still on the brown muck that Moira called coffee.

It was not the response he was hoping forâ€"or even expecting. "What did you say to him?"

"Stuff."

From two words to oneâ€"from the ever-loquacious Jubilee, no less. This, he decided, was definitely bad. He leaned forward, rubbing the bridge of his nose briefly, and then laid his hands on the table. "Jubilee," he murmured gently, and reached out to touch her hand. Anything to get her to look at him, show some reaction.

Fingers flexed and locked around the pale white porcelain mug under his touch, tension obvious in the delicate bones and tendons.

"I'm scared," she finally said, her eyes crystal in their hardness. Those two, blue sapphires finally tore themselves away from the brown glop in the mug to fix on Everett's own dark orbs. "Moira's had it for years, right? No biggie, they're gonna say. Just like AIDS. No symptoms for a while, and then he'll get sick. She's the example they kept giving us."

He nodded, his attention completely hers.

"But," she continued, her voice lifeless and flat still, "Moira's human."

"So?"

"So, every infection of a mutant has progressed much faster then Moira's," her eyes began to water briefly, tears threatening to escape, but she dropped her gaze and turned away. She wouldn't let him, her best friend, her boyfriend, and her constant companion, see her cry. "It'll start with a lung infection. It usually does. And then it'll move on. As it infects more and more of his DNA, he'll get red blotchesâ€”like sarcoma cancerâ€”as he begins to unravel at his genetic code."

"Jubilee," he said, trying to take her hand in his, but she just continued, undeterred.

"He'll start getting sores, then, after that. God, with all that skin, he's gonna be damn miserable," she took a shaky breath, the tears finally beginning to fall, creating twin trails down her fair cheeks. "About the same time as he gets the sores, he's going to lose control of his powers. And then, shortly after that, he'll dieâ€”screaming and in pain."

Any words of consolation or comfort were caught in his throat as it constricted painfully around the lump that had suddenly developed there.

"Now, ask me how I know."

He knew the answer, but he asked away, managing that single word. "How?"

"Because I watched a seven year old girl go through it," she said in a hushed voice. "And I don't know if I can do it again, Everett, I don'tâ€”"

Her hands flew to her mouth as she tried to stop the sob from coming, and the coffee mug tilted and then spilled the now lukewarm liquid across the table and into her lap. She scooted back and rose from her chair, her tiny face pale and drawn.

Everett was immediately on his feet and moving over to her. She struggled a moment against his embrace for a moment, trying to deny his comforting touch and soothing presence. But in the end, his love won out as she sniffled pathetically against his shoulder.

"I can't do this, Ev," she managed pitifully, "I can't lose another one. Mom an' Dad, then Illy, an' Clarice an'â€” and now Ange. I can't do this. I wasn't ready then, and I'm not ready now. And I'm doing the same thing Paige was doing before she knew Ange had the virus! God, I'm so damn patheticâ€”"

"I have faith in you," he said in a low voice, stroking her hair as she finally just succumbed to the sobs. "I know you'll be the best friend Ange could ever ask for in this. I know you'll be strong. I know, because that's part of why I love you, Jubes." Tears, unbidden and unnoticed, escaped his eyes. "And you're not pathetic."

She couldn't answer him with wordsâ€”merely clung to his shoulder and thanked God silently that she was so lucky to have him there at her side.

They stayed there, silent and weeping, until their hearts were both

wrung dry for the moment, and then wiped each other's tears away. "I love you," she murmured, as she resumed her place against his shoulder.

"Love you too, Jubilee."

And for now, they hoped it would sustain them through the darkness ahead.

\* \* \* \* \*

Finding Paige was not an easy task.

She wasn't in her room. She wasn't in the rec room. She wasn't in the lounge or the kitchen or anywhere else. After looking for her for almost an hour, Angelo finally gave up.

He retreated to his room, to try and plan, try and figure out what to say, where to start. What would he say to her? What could he tell her? Should he try and brush it off and pretend it didn't matter, when deep down inside it was gnawing at him like hungry rats?

He didn't know, even as he opened the door. Of course, all those thoughts fled when he found her sitting on the windowsillâ€”in his room.

"Angelo!" she exclaimed, turning as the door opened and giving him a worried once over. He was almost amused by her intense concern. They'd only known a few hours and now she was looking at it him as if he might be gone in the next instant! He'd barely found out about his infection last night, and she was already afraid of losing him?

He couldn't help but smile at her concern, though it left a bitter taste in his mouth. "Hey, chica, don't be lookin' at me like that, now," he chided her gently as she almost fell off the sill in her hurry to get up and over to him. He merely closed the door behind him, and was then almost bowled over by the force of her hug.

He slid his thin arms around her waist as she hugged him tightly, the ramble of her country twang lost to his shoulder. "Paigey, you gotta talk to \_me,\_ not my shirt."

She blushed, abashed, and then managed, "Ahâ€¦ Ah been worried about yuh, darlin'." She eased her tight arms into a more comfortable embrace, and then looked up at his, blue eyes finding blue eyes. "Youâ€¦ you okay?" she asked softly. He nodded once, and then gave her a slight smile.

"I was looking for you," he told her.

She went a deep, looking immediately contrite with eyes down and a stammered apology. "Ah'm sorry, darlin'. Ah figured ya'd come ta yoah room first. Ahâ€¦ Ah wasâ€¦" she sighed softly. "Ah'm sorry, darlin'. Ah didn't comeâ€¦"

"No no," he said, putting one gray finger over her lips, shaking his head slowly. "S'okay, Paigey. I promise. I needed time to think, anyway."

She nodded quietly, looking up at him for a long moment. She didn't

speaking, and he still didn't know what to say, how to react.

Her blue eyes took on that determination he knew so well—he'd seen her wearing that gaze when she's charged into the fray, ready to face the danger that was all too common to Generation X.

"Ah'm nou gonna lose you," she said, with that core of steel he knew she possessed at the heart of her. "We're gonna get through this, you an' me, look back ten years down the road, an' see that it made us stronger."

Her words made it all that much easier to smile, and nod. "I know. Hey, just a li'l virus, right? Not half as scary as L.A."

—

\_No, \_said a little voice inside him, \_but at least L.A. was something you could understand.\_

— —

She hugged him again, leaning her head on his shoulder, and then settled into a silence of mutual comfort for a time.

"Darlin'?"

"What, amante?"

"Howâ€| how do you feel?"

The question took him off guard. In all this time, he'd been told what would happen physically. He'd get sick and waste away and his DNA would unravel and fall apart at the seams.

But no one told him how he'd \_feel.\_

— —

Pride warred with need, as he looked down at the innocent face she tilted up to him, blue eyes eloquent in expressing her willingness to listen. He took an unsteady breath, and felt her arms tighten at his quavering tone. "I'm scared, Paige."

"So am Ah, darlin'," she admitted—but her next words still clung to that fragile thread of hope. "But that doesn't mean we won't kick the damn disease in the ass, now does it?"

He laughed softly at her brashness, and kissed her brow. "God, I love you so much," he murmured against her skin. "You keep me going, Paige, you really do."

She gave him the first genuine smile he'd seen since he'd arrived back in the house. "Good. Ah'd hate to think this was unrequited."

For a moment, they just paused there, looking down at one another. His blue eyes searched her face, memorizing every curve and slope, everything both perfect and flawed.

His expression grew serious, and he began to speak again, "No matter what happens, Paige, remember that, please? I lâ€"

Two fingers were laid across his lips. "Angelo, what did Ah say to you at the cliffs?"

His eyes brightened. "That you're tired of hearing the wordsâ€"that you want to be shown."

She smiled slightly, and then her fingers were in his hair, tugging him down to her. He could taste the salt of old tears, this time, not the sweetness of chocolate cake. But it didn't stop him.

The kiss lingered, and then she pulled back, brushing her lips over the loose flesh of his cheek. "Angeloâ€"Ah don't want to live like we got a lot of time," she murmured, "Ah want to use every second we got. Promiseâ€|" she took a deep breath, and continued on doggedly. "Promise me we won't waste any timeâ€| in anythin'."

For a moment, he didn't quite grasp the subtextâ€"but then it sank in. He searched her eyes again, for any shred of doubt, anything he could used to dissuade her from what he thought she meant.

But there wasn't one ounce of hesitation. "Ah don't want to hear the words, Angeâ€| an' I don't want to just say 'em mahself, either."

He nodded quietly, "I understand. I promiseâ€| we'll have everything we can, if it comes to that."

He sighed softly, leaning back against the wall. He was tired, he was emotionally exhausted, and when it came right down to it, he felt like hell. "Paige?"

"What darlin'?"

"Stay with me. I'mâ€| I'm dead tired, butâ€|" pride and need once again clashed, "I don't want to be alone right now."

He felt her lips curve against his shoulder. "No problem, darlin'. Just drop your tired self in bed an' I'll be right there with ya."

He smirked slightly, some spark returning to his eyes. "And one of these times," he murmured, "I promise, we won't go to bed together to \_sleep.\_"

It was a tiny thrill to see her blushâ€"and see that spark returned. "Ah'll be lookin' forward ta it."

And then she slid her hands down to his, and tugged him toward the bed.

He fell into it without complaint, and was asleep as soon as her arms were around him.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Bobby Drake got the call from Hank in the wee hours of the evening, he grumbled. And he cursed. And he, of course, did as he was asked.

Down into Hank's lab he went, murmuring to the computer to re-route the 'call' to the screen in the lab. "So," he muttered, "what the hell did you get me down in your lab for at \_this\_ hour?"

Hank's face was uncharacteristically serious, as he gazed back at his teammate. "One of the children is infected with Legacy, Robert," he said gravely. "And I need my most recent research sent over here."

"Oh, shit," Bobby winced as he dropped into the chair, his hands moving slowly over the keyboard before him. "It'll take a while. Do you have the connection ready at your end?"

"Yes, Bobby. And don't worry, I'll walk you through the uplink."

Bobby totally missed Hank's tired tone. "Oh. Gee. Thanks. I could never do it on my own." But nevertheless, one step at a time, he took Hank's careful instruction and finally, the data uplink between the Xavier Institute in Westchester County, New York to Muir Island, Scotland, was begun.

And now, Bobby had Hank all to himself while his copious research was transferred from one locale to another. Which left time to see just which one of the kids was infected.

"So, who got it?" Bobby could safely count out Paige or Jubilee. If either one of them had gotten the illness, a call to the mansion would have been made post-haste.

"Angelo Espinosa."

Bobby winced—he knew that Hank had convinced Angelo to join up that group of kids, three years ago, after discovering him trying to hitchhike on an access road from the mansion. They'd argued—but in the end, Angelo had joined with the 'next class' of new mutants under Xavier's wing.

"How is he?" Bobby asked.

"Alright. The infection is recent, so he hasn't developed a single symptom. But we'll know what to expect after we run the full physical and then the DNA scans." Hank rubbed briefly at his eyes—and Bobby decided that he did not look good at all. "He's feeling fine right now, but I'm sure that'll change."

"So, how are \_you\_ \_feeling?" Bobby asked, as he checked on the uplinks time.

Hank took another growling breath, trying to find the words to describe what he was feeling—horrifying helplessness, agonizing frustration, dark anxieties, and the outrage at the lack of support he got from the faculty. Running through the gamut of emotions, he could only snarl out three words that summed up everything he felt, his eloquence fleeing in the light of his emotional turmoil. "Fucking pissed off."

Bobby blinked a moment, startled at the abrupt curse—Hank simply didn't descend to swearing! No matter how bad it got, he usually came

up with some sort of ten-penny sentence and maintained his dignity and poise. Hank was definitely taking this harder than he thought! "If you start beating yourself over thisâ€" Bobby began, but the snarling, short-tempered Beast cut him off.

"Bobby, I am failing," Hank snapped. "Every infection means I haven't made an inoculation against this virus. Every death means I haven't found a cure."

His best friend's voice was surprisingly gentle. "You can't save the world, Hank. You can only do your bestâ€"which you've done. And are doing. You'll beat it, in the end."

"Yes. And will Angelo be alive to see it? Will Paige look at me with hate in her eyes because I couldn't save him? Will Jonothan wonder why the X-Men failed his friend?" The big man's shoulder's fell, and he let out a gusty sigh. "I am very weary of thisâ€"and this boy just strikes far too close to home."

Bobby canted his head like some faithful puppy, trying to figure out why his master was upset. "Just because he's 'one of us'?"

"No, Robert," Hank said, and then smiled wanly. "It's because he reminds me of you. Bright and capableâ€"but a damn slacker. He just wants to settle down and be normal. He's a joker and a flirt andâ€"everything I remember about you when you were the same age." The big mutant chuckled softly. "Of course, there are times when he reminds me of Logan, too, but most of the timeâ€"when he's at the most easeâ€"he reminds me of you."

"I'll take that as a complimentâ€"or maybe he should," the younger X-Man joked. "Soâ€"what's going to happen?"

"He's going to go back to school. I'm going to be jaunting between Muir, Massachusetts, and Westchester. I might even go check in on a few favors the Avengers owe me." Hank looked down at his computer console, and then sighed. "While this is downloading, I'm going to go see if I can brew a real cup of coffee."

"Yeah. Too bad we can't download you some of ours," Bobby offered. "I'll watch it and make sure it â€" it doesn't do something bad."

Hank smirked slightly, as he rose, and then said, "I bid you good evening, then, Bobby." He paused a moment, and then offered, "And thank you."

"Hey, what are friends for?"

Hank just smiled, and then his visage winked out as the screen went dark.

Bobby leaned back in his chair, looking at the computer around him, and then sighed. He'd have a bit of a wait ahead of him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angelo stumbled out of bed at eight o'clock. He woke to find himself alone, and while he didn't mind that Paige had gotten up and left, he didn't really feel all that great about it either. He'd asked her to

stay. And yet, she was gone.

His hand swept over where her body had left an indentation in the mattressâ€”the sheets were still warm. So maybe she hadn't been gone long?

He dragged himself from the bed, and then yawnedâ€”and realized he'd been in his clothes for nearly two days. It was off the shower next, and then he discovered that she'd left out a change of his clothing and packed the rest of his things upâ€”didn't take much for him to figure out that they were probably leaving today.

Once changed and thoroughly awake, he trudged into the hall. Might as well go get something to eat!

But as he neared the kitchen, he caught two voicesâ€”two voices he knew very wellâ€”murmuring to one another as if in secret.

"I cannot believe the way you English eat," was Paige, her voice held low. "The cholesterol alone would kill you!"

Yer Yanks don't know a bloody thing about breakfast. But yer at least know 'ow to make a bloody good batch of pancakes. That, of course, was Jonothon.

But this beggared the question: What the hell were they doing?

But then his nose caught the scents of syrup and the scent of just what Jonothon was talking aboutâ€”pancakes. He smiled slightly to himself.

"And how would you know if my pancakes are any good?" floated back Paige's voice.

Gayle told me. was Jonothon's terse reply.

"Oh," mused Paige. "Yeah, I suppose she's had them, at least once."

There was a pause, and Angelo crept closer, peering around the doorframe and into the kitchen.

It was the most bizarre domestic scene he'd ever laid eyes on.

There was Paige, moving as if perfectly at home within the Muir Complex kitchen, apparently have some sort of pantry 'spider-sense' when it came to finding where everything was.

Jonothon, on the other handâ€”was a laughable sight. He had batter on his shirtâ€”and on his handsâ€”and in his hair, and looked just a hint confused by Paige's total grace when it came to the kitchen. But nevertheless, Angelo could see that he was trying to be helpfulâ€”and mostly just being entertaining.

"Jon'thin, yoah lettin' 'em BURN!" Came the cry of absolute terror from the country girl, as she practically knocked Jono over in an effort to get to the pan. The young Briton, however, managed to save life and limb by getting out of the way at the last minuteâ€”by tripping over his own, big feet and falling backward, stopping his

fall at the last minute by grabbing onto one of the chairs.

At this point, Angelo couldn't help but laughâ€| an then watched with amusement as both young domestics froze.

"Angelo! Good mornin', darlin'!" Paige called cheerily, the burning pancakes briefly forgotten.

Cheers, Jonothon greeted a little more soberly, as he hauled himself upright and looked down at himself in disgust. Ugh.

Giving the seated young man one last wary glance, and then moved over to his girlfriend's side, sliding his arms around her waist.

"Sorry I wasn't there when you woke upâ€"I wanted to make sure breakfast was ready for youâ€"" But her rambling was cut off with Angelo's mouth on hers for a brief kiss, and then she just smiled as he released her.

"It's okay," he said. "I'm not angry or anything. Jeez."

Jonothon politely began to work again, trying not to intrude on the pair's moment. Angelo noted, and filed that away in his headâ€"he was still angry, butâ€| at least Jonothon didn't beat him up again.

Of course, what Angelo was going to say next was lost to the exclamation of, JESUS! THEY'RE BURNT CLEAN THROUGH! and the sound of the pan being lifted and put to the sink with much cursing. Then Paige was running over to him and yelling at him for being a git, and he was yelling back that she was making kissy face and had forgotten about the pancakes and he was trying to be nice and leave well enough aloneâ€|

And finally, Angelo cleared his throat with a loud 'Ahem!' just as he thought it was about to come to batter throwingâ€"not that Jono could've gotten anymore on his if he tried!

The pair turned and looked at him, brown and blue eyes blinking as it slowly sank in that they were making total fools of themselves. "Yes, Angelo?" Paige queried, as sweetly as she could muster, caught wielding a wooden spoon like a baton.

"You know, some of us might wanna eat that. I don't think it was even meant to be ammo."

Jonothon and Paige backed down, looking a touch abashed as they went back to their cookingâ€"or, rather, Paige's cooking and Jono doing clean up. Finally, two plates with an obscene amount of hot pancakes were put on the table as Jonothon began to get plates.

Roused by the smell of food creeping down the hallways, one by one, the rest of the current inhabitants of the complex came in from their rooms, and despite the shocked cry of, "Jono \_cooked?!"\_ from Jubilee, the food was good, and the meal only a little tense.

Angelo got a number of nervous smiles, worried glances, and quiet hellos, but he didn't let it phase him. He just smiled, nodded, and enjoyed his breakfast. He knew they were there for him. Jubilee's gentle proclamation of friendship, Everett's hand on his shoulder,

Monet's tiny, secret smile, even Jonothon's dark brown eyes boring into hisâ€”all of these things and more let him know a simple truth: No matter what, they'd be there for him. They would be there for him, no matter what happened. If he got sick, if he got better, it would be his one constant throughout the time to come.

As he settled in with Paige by his side while they discussed their travel time-table and getting ready to leave Muir, he knew, no matter what happened, it'd be okayâ€”so long as he had his friends.

End  
file.